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SUBJECT: LTP CALLS SARGSIAN TRAITOR ON "GENOCIDE" RECOGNITION

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Under the shadow of a heavy police presence, the opposition led by ex-President Levon Ter-Petrossian (LTP) held its second rally of the year on May 1. LTP accused President Sargsian of being willing to pay any price -- even denial of the "genocide" -- to remain in power, as evidenced by his support for the April 22 joint statement with Turkey regarding normalization of relations. The rally came on the eve of the May 2 kick-off of the campaign for Yerevan's first-ever municipal election on May 31. Despite opposition claims that tens of thousands attended the event, Emboffs assessed the crowd size at six-to-eight thousand. END SUMMARY

NORMALIZED TIES OK, BUT NOT GENOCIDE DENIAL

¶2. (SBU) Raising the April 22 joint Turkish-Armenian announcement of a road map to normalize ties, LTP announced that the ANC "is in favor of a speedy normalization of Armenian-Turkish relations, and is ready to support all the positive steps of the Armenian authorities with regard to this issue." But LTP stressed that his opposition Armenian National Congress objects to the creation of a special commission of Armenian and Turkish historians, "which we think can only mean denial of the Armenian Genocide."

¶3. (SBU) LTP charged that President Sargsian's support of rapprochement "at any cost, including renunciation of the Genocide," was given in order "to solve the problem of his legitimacy" and "keep his hold on power." According to LTP, Sargsian's next step will be to "sell out Nagorno-Karabakh."

¶4. (SBU) LTP asserted that the Armenia-Turkey agreement confirmed the success of Turkish diplomacy, aimed at preventing President Obama from describing the 1915 massacres as "genocide" in his April 24 statement. LTP said that Sargsian's renunciation of genocide recognition was sure to "attract much more ruthless assessments from radical circles in Armenia, and especially in the Diaspora." LTP then also blamed the Diaspora and former President Kocharian for setting up Sargsian to fail on the issue, arguing that they together had made "genocide" recognition a centerpiece of Armenian foreign policy issue over the past decade -- a trap that LTP himself had carefully avoided during his Administration. This had made it more difficult for Armenia to separate its pragmatic national interests from the moral issue of the "genocide."

TURKEY WILL FOLD IN THE END

¶5. (SBU) LTP then cast doubt on Turkey's commitment to normalized ties, asserting that Turkey would eventually yield to the opposition of its own public and that of Azerbaijan, and "have to return to its prior position" of resisting normalized ties. As a result, LTP argued, relations between Armenia and Turkey will not be normalized and the Armenian-Turkish border will not be opened -- unless there

is tangible progress in resolving the NK conflict.

POSSIBILITY, THOUGH, FOR PROGRESS ON NK

¶6. (SBU) On resolution of the NK conflict, LTP posited that the linkage of normalized ties to expected shifts in Armenian-Azerbaijani relations could actually create an impetus for advancing the settlement process. LTP said he was encouraged by the fact that President Obama -- whom he described as "an idealist in the best sense of the word" -- has now assumed moral responsibility for the U.S. government to be "more actively and impartially involved" in the dual processes of normalizing ties and settlement of the NK conflict.

AUTHORITIES MISHANDLING ECONOMIC CRISIS

¶7. (SBU) LTP also took the authorities to task for their mishandling of the economic crisis and their "inglorious" dissolution of the "Trial of Seven" against LTP's fellow oppositionists who have been detained in jail for over a year. In addition, he challenged the authorities to hold a clean municipal election on May 31, and mocked the authorities' claims that LTP is trying to "politicize the elections." (NOTE: Indeed, this comment -- absurd on its face from an American perspective -- has become a regular talking point of government and ruling party officials. We understand from the French Ambassador that the Europeans had recommended indirect elections (i.e., party list elections to a Council which would then elect the Mayor) as a way to depoliticize the elections during difficult times. END NOTE.)

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RALLY DYNAMICS, OR LACK THEREOF

¶8. (SBU) The rally lasted approximately two hours, the first 40 minutes of which the organizers played remixed campaign music from LTP's 2008 election rallies, presumably waiting for the crowd to swell, which by Emboffs' estimates never topped 8,000. The crowd demographic was largely reserved middle-aged to older (i.e., retired) men.

¶9. (SBU) The opposition complained that their numbers were reduced by roadblocks that the police erected in Armenia's regions to stop people traveling to Yerevan for the rally. Numerous media outlets reported on May 2 that most roads leading into Yerevan had been blocked and public transportation halted only to resume at 5 pm, after the rally had finished. However, the Chief of Police denied this to Ambassador. Some reporters claimed that unidentified groups of men in civilian clothing hindered their attempts to photograph and interview drivers and passengers who had been forced to turn around. Police denied the reports, claiming that they were merely conducting routine searches for illegal weapons.

¶10. (SBU) NOTE: The national police recently announced a month-long special campaign against illegal weapons, which correlates almost exactly with the election campaign period. The timing suggests a pretext for widespread searches and vehicle stops aimed at suppressing the opposition. END NOTE.

POST-RALLY MARCH ALLOWED AFTER ALL

¶11. (SBU) The opposition followed the rally with a march through downtown Yerevan, in spite of the municipality's decision not to sanction it. Police on the spot allowed the march to proceed, telling organizers they could do so in honor of Armenia's May 1 Labor Day holiday. The opposition's next large rally is scheduled for May 15. Smaller public meetings with voters are planned throughout May in Yerevan's 12 districts. Several of these meetings

have already taken place, largely without incident.

COMMENT

¶12. (SBU) LTP's tone while criticizing President Sargsian on Turkey and Nagorno-Karabakh was less vitriolic than it could have been. LTP further diffused the effect by also lambasting former President Kocharian and the Armenian Diaspora on the issue. Nevertheless, the remarks were not helpful. They do, however, reflect the widely held view in Armenia that President Sargsian was outwitted by Turkish diplomats who avoided "genocide" recognition by the USG, but gave nothing in return.

¶13. (SBU) In contrast with the large turnouts at LTP's campaign and protest rallies in 2008, the May 1 event paled in comparison. Although the road blocks likely prevented regional supporters from attending the rally, LTP's traditional base of support has always been in Yerevan -- where people were free to come and go on May 1, and where warm weather and a holiday made conditions ideal for a large turnout. Although one can never rule out the wily ex-president, slackening attendance at his rallies suggests that his supporters might be losing faith in his chances to win an election in the current political climate.

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